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Institute of Contemporary Arts

Wanda, Loden, lodestone
Elena Gorfinkel

I think that there is a miracle in Wanda.
– Marguerite Duras

Before Akerman's Jeanne Dielman peeled potatoes, scrubbed the bathtub and knifed a client in her bed, and before Varda's vagabond Mona hitched rides, slept in trailers, refused work and trudged through vineyards, there was Barbara Loden's Wanda, their spiritual predecessor, ghostly successor, tenacious forbearer, belated guest.

*

Wanda can only be described. Description is the only way to get close to this figure, this kernel of an idea, which is the entire world: a woman unmoored. Seeing this woman, Wanda Goronski, peeling away from a social world and its implacable demands, is seeing cinema do something for the first time.

*

Wanda is about a woman who drops out of the plot of social reproduction, abandoning her children and husband in Pennsylvania coal country to drift, to take up with whomever she may. By chance she stumbles upon a bar, in the process of being held up, and becomes the inauspicious sidekick to a petty crook, Mr Dennis. Co-presence is fate, happenstance of just having arrived. No possessions, dispossessed, Wanda casts her lot with him.

*

Loden considered her film 'an anti-*Bonnie and Clyde*', discussing the character pointedly: 'Wanda has no direction. She's just passing through life, mainly from man to man. But it's not a woman's film or a woman's problem. Wanda is an object, something handled, dropped. That's the story.' The narrative was based on a news story Loden read in 1961 about Alma Malone, a woman who was the accomplice to a bank robbery. When sentenced to twenty years for her participation in the crime, Malone thanked the judge. 'I was fascinated by what kind of girl would be that passive and numb...', Loden stated; this fascination with assent and acquiescence is in *Wanda* writ large.

*

Wanda is full of visions of such bruising plainness that in their crystalline form seem to say, 'this' is the only image you might need. One is the shock of Loden's miniature, pale figure, all white curlers and kerchief, purse and slacks, etched into a landscape of rural extraction. A bobbing particle in a vast terrain of black

slag heaps, she slowly draws an incomplete line across the film's frame. A woman rendered invisible by her world, her presence lacerates our view. An image worth one thousand films.

*

Wanda moves us because she moves slowly, she arrives late, oversleeps, doesn't belong, is unwanted. She moves us because her humanness traces the arc of a poetics of refusal, a poetics for which few feminists or cinephiles in 1970 yet had a name.

*

Wanda refuses symptomatology and the certitude of psychological causality. Who gets to articulate their trauma, to confess and carve the outlines of a legible self, when sleep, rest, food, breath are not yet guarantees? When placed alongside the feminist consciousness-raising documentaries of the era in which women speak their oppression and their coming-into-knowledge, *Wanda* makes clear that such self-scripting is itself a privilege that not every woman can afford.

*

Wanda's force is in its capacity for a descriptive aesthetic claim. Its description exposes, through a woman's life lived, feelings materialised as presence: no exposition, just exposure. Wanda is not quite good enough. She quietly endures myriad indignities, written plain and straight. 'You're just too slow for sewing operations', says the sweatshop boss who, in this declaration, justifies her exploitation, stealing from her two days' wages. 'Okay, thank you,' says Wanda. She absorbs this verdict like any other, like the judgment that names her a deserter before she has entered divorce court, which adjudicates her maternity. Late, she smokes as she walks in the courtroom, that momentary abeyance of a breath, a respite from giving an account of oneself, of having to speak before the judge, when she has already been spoken for. She is told to put the cigarette out. Sullen, she looks down, but when entreated, states, 'If he wants a divorce just give it to him ... they [the children] are better off with him.' Wanda elects to absent herself, recusing herself from the scene.

*

Wanda fulfils a wish that many women could not dare profess but felt as their secret encumbrance, abandoning what seemed an incontrovertible fate, a biological ordinance. Wanda, marvel of all, extracts herself from this wretched life. Quietly, in her leaving and in her resignation to being judged as 'no good', Wanda demands something else, a something else that is as yet unknown to her. What is this if not a form of strike?

*

Wanda strikes, and she strikes out. We watch her stumble through each excruciating humiliation. She jumps unclothed out of a rumpled motel bed

to chase a salesman who has bought her a Rolling Rock in exchange for a fuck. She is abandoned at a roadside ice cream stand, soft-serve cone in hand, as his car drives off, the ruse complete. All of these revulsions, in their violence bear a raw, assertive beauty. The ice cream was meant for him.

*

Loden, in her inhabitation of Wanda, rescues negation from negativity. She sees in the space opened by Wanda's silence a place for reckoning. It is a reckoning with all those ill-advised, risky, 'unsympathetic', ambivalent tendencies that roil within any woman who confronts the cruelties of subsisting in the exhaustion of just being, in facing, time and again, the circumscribed terms of her value, a value defined by men, by capitalism, by law.

*

'I'm just no good', she tells Mr Dennis: an incantation, a resignation, a certain taking leave from herself. The shame we feel on behalf of Wanda is ours to bear, a prosthetic we apply. Wanda's shame might be her very unselfconsciousness. If her feelings are inchoate, inaccessible, we recognize her need to move, a drive without a legible object. In this Wanda abjures affirmation. Loden long ago recognized the value and aesthetic necessity of the marginal, the unproductive, the failed, the exhausted.

*

Wanda's (that is, Loden's) gestures and postures revolve around folds and foldings. The folding of her forehead in her hand as she drinks a beer; her body under the sheets on the couch as she hides from her sister's squalling child and angry husband; her figure curled in a foetal position as Mr Dennis meets with his collaborator, plotting a heist that Wanda has no desire for, an unwanted script in which she must play a part. Wanda folds, slumps, crumples and drifts downward. Loden, a poet of the fatiguing grind of precarity, bids Wanda to occupy the corporeal equivalent of the downcast gaze.

*

'Want something blonde?' a man at a counter enjoins the tired Wanda.

*

Wanda burns herself into our consciousness, her obduracy a refusal to be read. Her silence is a magnification of all the foreclosures on women's subjectivity that patriarchy in its loquacity ceaselessly reiterates. Mr Dennis does his part in these repetitions, demanding that she play the role he has written for her. Like an overgrown child, Wanda's topknot ponytail gives her the jaunty contingency of a marionette. Haphazard and mussed, impetuously juvenile, it draws the ire of Mr Dennis. He wants it covered. Wanda has no money for a hat. Dennis tells her

she is stupid: ‘If you don’t want anything, you don’t have anything’, he continues, ‘You’re dead, not even a citizen of the United States.’ Looking down, looking askance, Wanda replies, ‘I guess I’m dead then.’

*

We all go seeking Wanda, wanting to find in our relation to that frangible presence on film the foundation of Loden’s alchemical skill – both in directing herself, embodying the felt reality of that role, and in conjuring this callous, unremitting world. Loden is not merely playing herself, as many critics have imputed, but she keeps in tension some embodied knowledge of that domain of hardscrabble economic privation, tamped down emotion, and incommunicative hurt that can only be performed through muscle memory. Loden’s body moves through all its capacities to render, to inscribe those cuts of exposure, the scalding truth of an unheard from, discarded, precarious mode of life. The plangent tremors of her face, the flatness and equivocation of her speech, all register of a struggle to merely subsist, the effortfulness of one woman’s bare survival.

*

Wanda, Barbara. Two figures indelibly linked in the weft of film history. The biographical figure of Loden is read through and against the ways in which *Wanda* has become an impossible object, the ultimate object of a feminist desire for a woman’s film, unattainable, a grail of loss. The very singular existence of Loden’s only feature film, made before her death at age 48 of breast cancer, stands as testimony to and as palimpsest of all the films by women that have remained unmade, unknown, unseen.

*

This could be the only film that has ever existed, a film for life.